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OJJDP Update on Research

Verne L. Speirs, Administrator **Reprinted from NIJ Reports SNI 212 January/February 1989**

Using the law to improve school order and safety

School safety and discipline have long been major concerns of teachers, parents, and students alike. However, a recent survey of four Chicago elementary schools indicates that teachers may have little confidence that school rules or legal standards can be used to improve discipline and make their schools safer.

Researchers also found that many teachers in these schools were poorly informed about the Chicago school system's discipline codes and the State laws and court decisions that deal with school law.

The 3-year project, titled "Using the Law To Improve School Order and School Safety," is being funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). It is a joint effort between Chicago public school administrators and the College of Education of the University of Illinois at Chicago. A similar project is also under way in Providence, Rhode Island. The project's hypothesis is that adequate respect, understanding, and appreciation for the law by educators, parents, and students can be the basis for improving school order and safety.

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The project is being conducted in four inner city Chicago elementary schools (kindergarten through eighth grade) that have large upper grade populations and many discipline and safety problems. Their student, faculty, and socioeconomic characteristics are also similar. Two of the schools are targeted for intervention by the program and the other two, the control schools, will receive no intervention. The study is being conducted in three major phases:

- During Phase 1, researchers gathered data about disciplinary conditions in the four schools and interviewed the principals and all the teachers to determine their views on school discipline and their knowledge of school-related law.
- During Phase 2, school administrators, teachers, students, and parents developed local crime, discipline, and safety codes and procedures based on information gathered during Phase 1.
- During Phase 3, currently under way, a variety of procedures called for in the new school codes are being implemented and evaluated. During this phase researchers will compare school order and safety conditions between the

From the Administrator

Our Nation's greatest resource is its youth. It is imperative, therefore, that we offer them the best educational opportunities possible. This means that in addition to quality teaching, we must provide our youth, and our teachers, with safe, orderly schools.

However, many schools today are plagued by a range of serious discipline and safety concerns. While in years past a teacher's most common discipline problem may have been students chewing gum, today's teachers and administrators face a host of serious problems, including possession of weapons, drug trafficking, and physical violence toward both teachers and students.

The National Crime Survey reported that during 1986 nearly three million incidents of assault, rape, robbery, and theft took place in schools or on school property. It's no wonder, then, that there is increasing public concern about improving the safety of our schools and returning to a disciplined, healthy educational environment.

Recognizing the critical importance of making our schools safer, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) is sponsoring a major research project to determine how the law can be used to improve school order and safety.

Although the study is not yet completed, we have prepared this article to inform juvenile justice practitioners and educators of our findings thus far. We believe this project can serve as a model for other communities and schools working to develop and implement discipline and safety policies. Such policies can help students to learn and our teachers to teach in safe, crime-free environments.

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experimental and control schools before and after the introduction of the new codes.

School order and safety conditions

After analyzing discipline records and surveying teachers and students, researchers found that while conditions in the four schools are far from ideal, the schools appear to be islands of safety in an ocean of danger when compared to the surrounding community. Teachers and students were far more fearful of conditions immediately outside the school building than within the school. Yet:

- More than half the teachers reported being subjected to verbal abuse from students.
- Half the students said they felt unsafe in school and had been victims of theft.
- Teachers said physical fights between students were the most pressing discipline problem they faced.

The most frequently reported offenses, in terms defined by the systemwide Chicago Schools Uniform Discipline Code, were defying authority, fighting, offensive language or gestures, and disruptive behavior. The greatest number of violations occurred in grades five and six and during March and October.

Knowledge of school law

Teachers gave wrong answers to nearly half the questions on an 18-item test of State law, court decisions, and district policy related to school discipline. They knew most about the court-established principle of religious freedom in public schools, the district prohibition against corporal punishment, and students' right to procedural due process. They knew least about the concept of acting in the parents' stead in matters of school discipline, and most teachers believed students' right to free speech extended far beyond the limits established by the courts.

Although the systemwide Chicago Schools Uniform Discipline Code has been in force for several years, a third of the teachers judged their colleagues to be poorly informed about it. Two-thirds of the students indicated no knowledge and awareness of the code.

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Attitudes toward discipline

Most teachers and students expressed positive attitudes toward each other and their schools. Teachers believed that students were entitled to civil rights protections, even if this made it harder to run the school. Yet most teachers felt that:

- Controlling drugs and weapons in school took precedence over protecting civil rights.
- Written discipline policies are a waste of time because they are not enforced.
- The law favors perpetrators of school disorder and inhibits improvements.
- Courts interfere too much in school policy.
- Teachers should not have to justify their disciplinary policies to students or parents.
- Parents do not support school efforts to enforce discipline.

Students generally felt that school rules were fair and that they received just and equitable treatment from teachers and administrators. On the other hand, they also believed that they would not be able to get an unfair rule changed and that they had little to say in how the school was run.

Principals generally viewed the Uniform Discipline Code as a flexible guideline rather than as a set of rules to be uniformly and consistently enforced.

Administration of school discipline

Results of both student and teacher surveys indicate that teachers used a variety of disciplinary practices that the researchers considered inappropriate or that were prohibited: keeping students after school, sending them out of class, giving them extra assignments, and lowering their academic grades.

The researchers also found that the most serious discipline violations were more likely to be ignored than the less serious. For example, although the Uniform Discipline Code defines student fights as more serious infractions than defiance of authority, no action was taken in almost half the reported student fights. In contrast, only 18 percent of the defiance-of-authority violations were similarly ignored.

Moreover, the more severe penalties (e.g., suspension or disciplinary reassignment) were rarely assigned to serious offenses such as student fighting but were frequently assigned to less serious offenses such as using offensive language or defying authority.

Implications of these findings

Conductors of the study conclude that since some schools exist in neighborhoods plagued with violence, drug abuse, and other dangers, discipline and security problems cannot be remedied by the schools alone. Nonetheless, the

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researchers suggest that schools can improve in this area if educators adequately familiarize themselves with school rules and the law as it relates to school discipline, order, and safety and then implement this knowledge in their everyday interactions with students. They further emphasize the importance of communicating this awareness to students and parents.

Intervention efforts

The study's second phase consisted of developing local discipline and safety codes that respond to the unique order and control needs of each school.

A steering committee consisting of teachers and parents in the two experimental schools was formed to develop a local school discipline code. The steering committee reviewed research data on discipline and safety conditions in the two schools and on how discipline was currently being administered.

Steering committee members were taught about school law, including topics such as due process and the "balancing of interests" concept used to determine when student rights may be superseded by school needs to maintain order and safety.

The steering committee worked with students, parents, teachers, and administrators in developing a school discipline code so that all groups could have a sense of commitment to the code and input into the final discipline manual to be produced.

This developmental effort is now completed. Discipline and safety policy and procedures developed by each of the schools were incorporated into a single common manual, with very slight modifications applicable to each of the two schools. The manual emphasizes positive approaches to discipline and the prevention of discipline problems. It also requires using teachers—known as "discipline educators"—to integrate instruction about discipline into the curriculum and to involve students and parents in developing classroom-level rules coordinated with the code of discipline, allowing for unique needs of the various class levels. The manual also contains clear, specific discipline rules and expectations, along with commensurate and compatible positive and negative consequences.

As part of the study's third phase, the manual is being introduced in the experimental schools. This is taking place during the current 1988–1989 school year. To ensure that both students and parents are positively involved with the manual's implementation, the schools are:

- Holding orientation meetings on the manual for parents and teachers who, in turn, will ensure that students become well acquainted with the manual.
- Distributing agreement forms with the manual to be signed by all students, parents, and educators as an indication that they know about the manual and are committed to its objectives.
- Developing a new in-school suspension room at one of the experimental schools as an alternative to out-of-school suspensions for disruptive students. Teachers have agreed to accept higher class enrollments to free a teacher to supervise this room. University intern students are helping with this.
- Forming a discipline council composed of teachers, parents, and students, chaired by the building discipline administrator (assistant principal). The council will meet regularly to review school order and safety conditions, recommend activities for maintaining adequate control, and review special discipline cases or issues referred to them by a teacher, administrator, student, or parent.
- Making the project staff available for consultation with individual teachers, administrators, students, or parents to discuss ways to improve discipline and safety.

Evaluation of the project

At the end of the 1988–89 school year, researchers will measure the amount of improvement in school order and safety resulting from these interventions. The effects will be compared with discipline conditions in preceding years as well as with conditions existing in the two control schools. These results will be shared with the Chicago Board of Education's central office to explore plans for implementing the project on a wider scale.

To obtain further information about this project, contact the College of Education, Policy Studies, Box 4348, Chicago, IL 60680, or OJJDP's Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse, Box 6000, Rockville, MD 20850; or call 1–800–638–8736.

The Assistant Attorney General, Office of Justice Programs, coordinates the activities of the following program Offices and Bureaus: the Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Institute of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Office for Victims of Crime.

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